

Bromeliads and why you should love them

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When you think of a landscape “going native,” do you envision a weedy wild mess? The idea of planting natives is a good thing and how it looks depends on the homeowner. This article will give some of the benefits and misconceptions of planting natives in the landscape.

Do you have some neglected bromeliads and to your surprise they are still living? Bromeliads are easy-to-grow, low maintenance plants. With such a variety to choose from and the ability to live in or outside the home, even someone with a black thumb can grow one.

Master Gardener and president of the Gainesville Bromeliad Society Mary White first heard the word “bromeliad” in the early '90s when she bought one at a garage sale. Before leaving for a year, she tossed it under her deck and wished it good luck. When she returned, she looked under that deck and there they were — several of them — happy and thriving. She still has its descendants hanging in pots in her backyard, getting no love and thriving.

A few years ago, she saw a notice about a program sponsored by the Gainesville Bromeliad Society for bromeliad beginners. They were offering information AND a free plant. Now she is hooked.

Many bromeliads are epiphytes, meaning they take their moisture and nutrients from the atmosphere and the debris that decays in their “cups.” There are over 3,000 species and many are incredibly gorgeous. They are one of the most colorful families with both their leaves and flower spikes. They can provide a unique texture and more tropical look to your garden.

Why should you love these plants? As mentioned above, they are hardy. Not all of them, but many. It should come as no surprise that ball moss and Spanish moss, and even pineapple, are in this family.

Bromeliads bloom at unexpected times, at least for Mary they do. She loves the unpredictability. Many factors affect blooming including the plant age, day length, light, water, and temperature. The foliage is so attractive that a bloom is just the added wow factor.

Bromeliads slowly die over a year or two after they flower, but young plants, or pups, often develop at the base of the mother plant. You can keep it there or start a new plant by cutting off the pup when it is half the size of the parent plant. It often takes about a year to go from pup to bloom.

Many species love the shade while others prefer the sun, and many don't seem to care. The light will affect the bromeliad's leaf color, shape and growth rate. Too low of light will lead to long, thin and greener leaves. Too high of light levels will make it shorter, thicker and lighter.

In North Florida, we have to be a little more selective of the species we “throw” outside since they are a tropical or subtropical plant. The more cold-hardy bromeliads include species of *Dyckia*, *Puya*, *Aechmea*, *Nidularium*, and *Vriesea*. At the extension office, we also have species of *Neoregelia* and *Quesnelia* that are thriving under the trees.

Bromeliads can also be kept as a houseplant and it can be kept in containers. If it is a houseplant, place it in a high light area. They also can be attached to trunks of trees using glue and stockings to hold them until their

roots attach. You may have even seen decorative bromeliads, especially *Tillandsia*, on boards, bark, or wreaths.

They require very little water which is great for our Florida-Friendly yards. A spritz on their leaves and roots every so often during a drought may be all they need. Overwatering can kill them faster than underwatering.

Many bromeliads hold water in their cups. Because of this, you may need to spray them out once a week, especially during the summer, to reduce mosquito larvae from developing. You can also sprinkle a mosquito control product, *Bacillus thuringiensis* subspecies *israelensis*, in the cups. It is available at garden center and home supply stores.

There you have it — pretty easy plants. If you want to be hooked like Mary and get more information about bromeliads AND a free plant, attend Bromeliana Fest on April 23 from 2 to 4 p.m. at the UF/IFAS Entomology and Nematology building off of Hull Road near the Lacrosse field. Check out their website at <http://www.gainesvillebromeliadsociety.org/>. You can also find information on bromeliads at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep337>.